



TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

Good Afternoon,

My name is Michael Criss, First Selectman for the Town of Harwinton.

I am testifying on behalf of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM), Connecticut's statewide association of towns and cities representing 96% of Connecticut's population. We appreciate the opportunity to testify on bills of interest to all towns and cities, in particular:

SB 847, "An Act Creating a Code of Ethics for Municipal Officials and Employees"

CCM and the Town of Harwinton oppose this bill as it would impose a statewide code of ethics for municipal officials and employees, creating a one size fit all approach. Developing guidelines for cities and towns to adopt enforce and then mold into each unique community is a much better approach. Also requiring a town to adopt a code of ethics over a 2-3yr time frame would be a better approach.

CCM has consistently opposed a single statewide ethics code for municipal officials and employees. Do not misunderstand municipal officials intentions are not to elude ethical practices, as municipalities benefit from having ethics policies and codes in place, but they should not be dictated by the State on how to do it. Rather, each municipality should be allowed to develop policies and procedures that work for their community. The State's diversity has historically been celebrated – towns and cities range in population and have a variety of government structures, from boards of selectman, to strong mayors, charters and statutory. An ethics policy that works in some communities may be ineffective, or even burdensome, in others. Even relatively populous municipalities rely on unpaid residents to fill local boards and commissions.

Imposing a state-mandated "one-size-fits all" approach could do more harm than good. This would take away the voice of local residents to design and implement a process that works best for their individual community. It will create a next to impossible situation to get volunteers to join boards and commissions, especially if you, as a volunteer, now have to disclose financials, tax returns etc. just to volunteer.

In particular, the bill is overly broad in the definition of municipal employee as it may apply to all types of employees. Considerable time and money will need to be made to train these officials, especially temporary or seasonal ones. In addition, those volunteering their time, whether on a Board or Commission, as well as volunteer fire or ambulance associations may have to comply. This may deter people from serving at the local level. Each community is different, some may rely on particular types of employees more than others.

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Towns and cities are already working to develop and enhance ethics codes. Over the past 10 years, CCM has conducted 45 separate ethics workshops attended by nearly 1,300 local officials – not including 3 scheduled ethics training for 2015. These workshops are in addition to several other tools CCM provides to members, such as ethics information kits, presentations and assistance in creating a new or updating existing local ethics policies.

A CCM survey conducted in 2013 found that:

- **132 municipalities already have an ethics code in place** that meets the needs of their community (several are in the process of drafting a code) including Harwinton.
- **127 include a conflict of interest policy.**
- **100 have a procedure for addressing allegations of unethical behavior.**
- **105 have a policy on accepting gifts.**

A statewide code of ethics would conflict with local efforts. The time, effort and costs for the development, training and implementation of current ethics codes would be in vein. A new set of standards and trainings would have to be implemented in order to comply with the provisions in the bill, which would be an added expense of time and money.

It is fair to assert that the Office of State Ethics currently does not have the current staff and resources to implement and enforce a statewide municipal ethics code, as prescribed in this bill. Given the current fiscal climate, it does not appear that additional funds would be available in the upcoming fiscal years to allow proper implementation of this proposal to occur.

CCM and the Town of Harwinton urge the Committee and General Assembly to oppose SB 847.

Thank you.

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If you have any questions, please contact Michael Criss, First Selectman, Town of Harwinton
860-485-9051 Mike Muszynski, Senior Legislative Associate of CCM
at mmuszynski@ccm-ct.org or (203) 500-7556.